

OUR GRANDPARENTS' TIME IN WARRENTON

by Watt Childress

I walk with my grandfather-by-marriage down a narrow paved trace in Warrenton. Papa's speaking about spruce trees which move slowly past us as we walk; about how these ancient-looking zyloid plants are stronger pound-for-pound than steel. Such wild local details astonish me more, perhaps, because I'm not a native. Papa's father farmed here in this place called the Pacific Northwest, but my bloodroots are in a place called Appalachia. Of course that's just our genetic, nomenclative territories. I glance across the wet-whistled air at the hoary red face of my Celtic companion, and dote on less materialistic reckonings of kin. The beard moss blows from the spruce bowers with shadowy grace, like weather-dogged galloons hanging from the salty mast of some sea-seasoned galleon.

"They make the fastest boats in the world for crew racing", says Papa aiming the arrow of his arm at the massive evergreen projectiles, "the fastest eight-oared vessel, what they call a 'shell', a 'racing shell'. When these men are moving together in training, or when they go to these big events in London or Berkeley or Pennsylvania, they have to be a unit. These eight men have to be one. When they all row together, they actually *shout!* They feel unified. That's spruce heaven, if you want to put it that way. How do we achieve the wonderful sense of community that these men feel? It's a spiritual experience."

Papa is a wise old spirit. He has a book of cards called "Medicine Cards", with pictures of different animals. Early Tuesday evening I draw the elk card, which is identified with the key word "stamina". According to the designers of these cards, elk have "a curious kind of warrior energy because, except at mating time, they honor the company of their own gender. They can call on the medicine of brotherhood or sisterhood. In discovering the strength which is gained from loving the gender that is your own, you will feel the comradeship that arises from similarity of experience. This is a special medicine that allows the friendship of others of your same sex to overcome potential competition or jealousy."

The civic value of fraternity is an old one. I reflect on the manner in which modern people fraternize over values. For the natives here as well as my own ancestral natives, animals are often used to illustrate values which are essential to civil coexistence. Today, animals like plants are mostly considered as commodities. They hold little meaning beyond their relationship to mammon. Yet it's true that the elk were a lodge of living creatures long before it became the government-registered name of another Non-Governmental Organization (NGO).

Later, after our walk, my wife Jennifer and I sit around the dinner table with Papa and his wife Margaret. We've been legally married for over 3 years; they've been married for over 60. As we taste the sublime miracle of Mama's macaroni-and-cheese, in a room paneled with reclaimed wood from the old Bumblebee cannery in Astoria, we discuss whether or not to attend tonight's OCA meeting. That fellow named Mabon is speaking here in Warrenton, to a warren of citizens concerned with the warranty of civil rights for homosexuals. Jennifer is willing to attend the meeting, but Mama and Papa don't want to go. Papa says he's familiar with other meetings of this nature that've been held in the Northwest. He says that if we were to go, we'd likely find the things we heard "disgusting". Like Jennifer and I, Mama and Papa have homosexual friends, many of whom have been in committed monogamous relationships for longer than the average heterosexual.

So we stay home with our grandparents. Papa speaks to me while he watches me write down his words, and sometimes I speak back. From a distance across the room, unaware of my writing,

Jennifer hears the conversation proceeding very slowly, lagging for extended periods and then flowing along. She says we sound like we're "talking underwater", as she sits carding wool with Mama. Their carding makes a rhythmic scratching sound. And so goes a quiet evening with family in Warrenton.

Later, for the hell of it, I read what is written concerning the Rabbit card in Papa's book. The key word here is "fear". A very long time ago Rabbit was "a brave and fearless warrior" who was befriended by a witch named Eye Walker. The two spent much time together, and were very close.

Eye Walker has magic, which she offers as a gift to aid her close companion Rabbit, who accepts. But then Rabbit becomes fearful of the possibility that this magic could be turned against him, so he decides to abandon his relationship with Eye Walker. He divorces her, in a sense. As a reward for dissolving their friendship, Eye Walker lays a curse upon Rabbit and his tribe which says "from now on, you will call your fears and your fears will come to you". Now Rabbit is the Fear Caller. He goes out and shouts, 'Eagle I am so afraid of you.' If Eagle doesn't hear him, Rabbit calls louder, 'Eagle, stay away from me!' Eagle, now hearing Rabbit, comes and eats him. Rabbit calls bobcats, wolves, and coyotes, and even snakes until they come."

The following morning we drive to Astoria where I'm treated to some extra fine local vittles at the Columbian Cafe. I learn that the place has been a civic gathering place since 1930, and has been operated by the present owner for the past twelve years. Sitting at the counter we watch him grill French bread to accompany our soup. He's wearing a button that says "Straight But Not Narrow", having attended Mabon's OCA meeting. He says the event was fairly low-key, and is grateful for an absence of violent confrontation. Yet there is both regret and resignation in his voice when he says "Nobody's minds were changed. The lines are drawn."

Jennifer picks up a copy of The Daily Astorian, and reads on the front page of the OCA leader's pitch in Warrenton. The first three paragraphs of the article read as follows:

Lon Mabon, the leader of the Oregon Citizens Alliance, wants to turn back the clock to his grandmother's time.

"I'm 46 years old and I've seen very dramatic changes in society, some bad, some good," Mabon told a gathering of the Clatsop County OCA Tuesday night.

"When I was growing up we didn't have the gang or drug problems. What we believe is that those things are occurring as we move away from our basic standards as a culture. Now there's less respect for life, each other's property and for traditional values than ever before," he said.

I can agree with many of the words used here, as I believe we are suffering from a decay in cultural heritage and traditional values. We've squandered our natural resources, created mountains of waste, and replaced historic family farms and local businesses with chain developments. Cheapness has been substituted for quality. We consume much and produce little. These problems stem from a disintegration of community in this country, and it is critical that citizens come together to act upon the civic values which will turn this situation around. Unfortunately, people like Mabon appear to be more interested in creating hateful distractions from this real work, searching instead for easy scapegoats upon which to vent their fears.

"The attack isn't against individuals," Mabon continues. "I think homosexual behavior is wrong. It's against nature and what's right and wrong in our universe..."

Evidently, the people who attended the meeting were about equally split in opinion, for and against such double-mouthed statements from Mabon. Jennifer and I chose not to go, to stay home honoring time with our grandparents. In this eleventh hour of fear for American communities, we can derive stamina from our ancestors. By remembering the best of our human heritage we can overcome today's misguided digressions into bigotry, and learn to row together as one.

Cries to Remember

by Mary Anne Radmacher-Hershey

The manicurist is Arsenia from the Phillipines. Stateside relatives are in Texas although most of her "families" are still in the Phillipines. She met her best friend in Texas in 1980. A gay man. She said they were like sisters.

"You know, sisters. So many gay men are like that, sensitive, like a woman. That's why we get along so well, you know."

She speaks "you know", assuming a great deal about me. She seems so sincere -- I don't mind.

They moved to San Francisco together and he started his own salon.

"He was a hairdresser. I was a manicurist. This is how we met, of course."

Her girlfriends were all so jealous of her. He was so good looking. So sexy.

"We have our own lives. Each of us. We are just friends, but they do not accept it as I say. Even though I say we are friends only, they still believe we are involved. So," (she blushes) "I let them think as they will."

She is fourteen years in America and she still deals with most events in the present tense. Her friend is now dead over two years, although she describes him in the present tense.

"He is my best friend. The best friend ever I have. He is so kind. We are very close. He make a poem for me."

This poem he "make", he wrote on his own. It was so good she first thought he had just copied down the words, but his name is on it. He read it in a competition. No, she is certain he wrote this poem all by himself.

This poem is treasured, safely folded and tucked into the inside fold of her small date book.

"The poem he makes is about life. About living just this day. It is very... touching."

She pauses. She is obviously moved by her recollections. She continues, then, to introduce me to this dear friend.

"Very sweet. He is very giving. His birthday is July 18. A Cancer, you know?"

She questions -- wondering if I understand the sweet Cancer nature. I think of the July-born friends I know. Sweet? Yes. Tenaciously loyal, funny, creative, affectionate. I understand how one would claim such a friend as "best". I nod.

She goes on, now speaking about his memorial service. Here she uses past tense. "After he died..." In fact she uses "died" so many times I finally tactfully frame my question.

"Was it an accident?"

"Oh, no!" she responds with speed and surprise that I would even have to ask.

"He died from AIDS. Yes, AIDS, of course."

I have fought the impulse to categorically assume that a young gay hairdresser living in San Francisco had to have died of AIDS. There are, after all, other diseases, car accidents and violent crimes.

"No, no accident. It was AIDS."

She continues the manicure and her story.

"He asked for his ashes to be scattered across the bay. His parents rent a boat and his friends, all of us, we are on this boat. All of us say something."

"No one knows about this poem. No one knows I carry it since he die. So I recite. But someone else finish. Someone recite for me because I cannot finish. I cannot because there is too much weeping."

"From this poem, which no one knows but me, we hear him. We all know these are words he makes himself because they are so much like his sound. Not just me. Everyone cries. Everyone cries to remember."

She is sorry to excuse herself. She dabs at her eyes. She pulls her purse from a cupboard behind the manicure table. Hopeful and then disappointed -- she has left her calendar and, therefore, the poem at home.

She tells me she felt badly about carrying the poem around in her calendar. As if there wasn't enough dignity in that. She is hoping to find a special way to preserve it.

"I go to the card store where they have this machine that, you know, says what you want. It says what you tell it. But I cannot do it. It is wrong to place his words in a machine. So I find some artist who will make his words beautiful. Until I make such a find I will keep it where I know it is safe. I will keep it close to me."

I noted the tremble of her lips and her utter earnestness. That poem is kept so close it will never be lost. It is kept in the deep chamber of her heart where she cries to remember her friend. Her best friend who, of course, died of AIDS.

